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ABSTRACT

Over 10 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students in public schools and more than 18 percent of AI/AN students in Bureau of Indian Affairs and tribal schools are eligible for or placed in special education programs. This digest addresses four selected issues in the education of AI/AN students with disabilities. First, the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provide for the awarding of personnel preparation grants to colleges and universities; some grants have been awarded specifically for training special educators to work with AI/AN students. Grant recipients include a program on the Navajo Reservation that trains both Indian and non-Indian service providers, programs aimed at AI/AN college students, and grants to tribal colleges. Second, IDEA guarantees parents certain rights concerning their involvement in their child's education. Suggestions are offered for facilitating the involvement of AI/AN parents. Third, IDEA mandates that all students be evaluated using nondiscriminatory evaluations and multiple forms of assessment and using their native language. Suggestions for culturally and linguistically appropriate assessments are offered. Finally, IDEA requires education in the least restrictive environment. The inclusive model of education adopted by Kayenta Unified School District (Arizona) is briefly described. (Contains 13 references.) (SV)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools including Alaska Natives and American Indians, Mexican Americans, Migrants, and Outdoor Education

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There are approximately 500,000 American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students attending K-12 schools in the United States. Of those attending publicly funded schools, approximately 90 percent attend public schools, 10 percent attend schools operated or funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and tribes, and a small number attend private schools. Data suggest that AI/AN students are "slightly overrepresented in the special education population" (U.S. Department of Education, 2000, p. xxxiii). Although AI/AN students represent less than one percent of the school-age population, they represent 1.3 percent of the special education population. In addition, more than 10 percent of AI/AN students in public schools (Pavel & Curtin, 1997) and more than 18 percent of AI/AN students in BIA and tribal schools are eligible for and/or placed in special education (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2000). AI/AN students are most often identified as having a specific learning disability, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or a speech/language impairment.

This Digest presents suggestions for addressing selected issues in the education of AI/AN students with disabilities. Issues include preparation and recruitment of special educators and related service providers, the rights and responsibilities of parents, development and use of culturally and linguistically appropriate assessments, and education in the least restrictive environment.

Preparation and Recruitment of Special Educators and Related Service Providers

The 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) include provisions for the awarding of personnel preparation grants to colleges and universities. Several of these grants have been awarded for the specific purpose of training special educators to work with AI/AN students (Office of Special Education Programs, 2000). Grant recipients include the Reaching American Indian Special/Elementary Educators project (RAISE) at Northern Arizona University (NAU) and two projects at The Pennsylvania State University—the American Indian Special Education Teacher Training Program (AISETTP) and the American Indian Special Education and Education Administration Doctoral Program. RAISE trains both Indian and non-Indian service providers. Participants work with Navajo children in their local communities and schools, thereby experiencing firsthand the language, culture, and traditions of their students. Graduates of the RAISE project earn dual certification in special and elementary education. At Penn State, AI/AN students complete course work in special education and educational administration; attend seminars on Indian education; present at national conferences (e.g., National Indian Education Association, The Council for Exceptional Children, the American Educational Research Association); and conduct research aimed at improving the education of AI/AN students with disabilities and the personnel who serve them. Graduates of the AISETTP provide special education services for two years for each year of funding they received. Graduates of the doctoral program work as researchers, faculty members, and school administrators.

Personnel preparation grants have also been awarded to tribal colleges and universities.

- Dull Knife Memorial College (MT) will train 24 paraprofessional and professional special educators.
- Ft. Peck Community College (MT) will grant 16 associate and 16 bachelor degrees in special education.
- Little Big Horn College (NE) will train 24 American Indian special educators at the associate, bachelors, and master's degree levels.
- Sinte Gleska College and Sitting Bull College (ND) will work collaboratively to prepare 15 special educators every 2.5 years.

Personnel preparation grants provide a unique opportunity to establish partnerships between local communities, tribes, departments of education, and universities and colleges for the preparation and recruitment of special educators and related service providers.

The Rights and Responsibilities of Parents

Special education is a collaborative process involving students, parents, and educators. IDEA defines parents as biological or adoptive parents, legal guardians, and surrogate parents. IDEA guarantees parents the right to serve on teams that conduct evaluations and develop individualized education plans (IEPs), review their child's education records, request that information in the child's records be amended, and be notified of proposed actions regarding their child's education. Parents also have the right to have information presented in their native language or primary mode of communication (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments, 1997).

To facilitate parent involvement, it is recommended that educators

- encourage family-oriented activities and be prepared to interact with the entire family unit
- be nonjudgmental
- be knowledgeable of federal, state, and tribal agencies from which the family receives services (Ramirez, et al., 1988),
- when possible, utilize the services of Indian school liaisons who are trained to act as advocates for AI/AN children and their families (Stuecher, Grossman, Hakala & Kozlowski, 1985)
- be responsive to parents' needs and concerns, which may impact the level and extent to which parents are involved in their child's education (e.g., transportation, childcare)
- be flexible when scheduling meetings
- establish parent support groups or networks (Johnson, 1991)

As parents become more involved in their children's education, it is important to acknowledge, affirm, and encourage their efforts. Meaningful parent involvement also requires parents to be proactive. The Education for Parents of Indian Children with Special Needs Project (EPICS) (Manuelito & Johnson, 1995) encourages parents to ask for clarification, share information, express their feelings (including what they like and dislike), and at the conclusion of meetings, review information and plans of action to ensure that they are understood.

EPICS is one example of resources available to parents and educators through Parent Training Centers. These centers are funded by the U.S. Department of Education and are located across the country. The Native American Families Together Parent Training and Information Center (NAFTPTIC) is another example. NAFTPTIC, operated out of Moscow, Idaho, is a collaborative effort in which community members are recruited and trained to provide support and assistance to AI/AN families of children with disabilities. This project serves AI/AN families nationwide (OSEP, 2000).

Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Assessments

IDEA mandates that all students be evaluated using nondiscriminatory evaluations and multiple forms of assessment. IDEA also requires that students be assessed in their native language or other mode of communication. If tests are not available in the student's native language, interpreters should be used. For students identified as limited-English proficient, tests should focus on assessing the impact of the child's disability on his or her educational performance rather than assessing the child's English language skills (IDEA, 1997). When assessing AI/AN students, educators are advised to

- use a combination of formal and informal assessments (e.g., norm-referenced, curriculum-based, dynamic assessment, ecological inventories, observations, self-reports, interviews, task analysis)
- involve parents and families in the assessments
- be aware of and responsive to cultural and linguistic differences
- interpret the results of standardized tests with caution (e.g., Banks, 1997; Johnson, 1991)

It is also important to identify and use tests that include culturally and linguistically diverse students in their norms. Recognizing that there are few tests that meet this criterion, Gallup-McKinley County Schools (New Mexico), has begun developing Navajo norms for the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children - Third Edition (WISC-III) (Tempest, 1998). This process not only allows educators to compare the performance of Navajo students to their peers, it assists educators in differentiating cultural and linguistic differences from learning difficulties.

Education in the Least Restrictive Environment

After a student has been evaluated and determined eligible for special education, the IEP team must select an appropriate educational placement. IDEA requires that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent appropriate. The Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD) (Arizona) has responded by adopting an inclusive model of education in which general education teachers assume responsibility for the education of all students (Dreisbach, Napier, Russell, Franklin, Bizardi, & Yellowhair, 1995). General educators are assisted by a team of special educators or support facilitators. Support facilitators

- help general education teachers write IEP goals and objectives
- modify the general education curriculum
- provide information and resources to general educators
- provide individual and small-group assistance
- collaborate with home liaisons to ensure that parents understand their rights and responsibilities
- coordinate related services

KUSD utilizes a variety of instructional and planning tools to include students with disabilities in the general education setting. Techniques used include "A Circle of Friends," an empathy training program in which all students are encouraged to actively participate in the classroom. The purpose of this program is to build community within the school. The McGill Action Planning System (MAPS) is used with students with more severe disabilities. MAPS is based on the principals of integration, individualization, teamwork and collaboration, and flexibility. MAPS is a collaborative effort involving the student with a disability, nondisabled peers, friends, family members, and general and special educators (Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989).

Conclusion

Although this Digest does not attempt to address nor to resolve all issues in the education of AI/AN students with disabilities, it does provide suggestions for increasing the number of qualified special educators; facilitating parental involvement; conducting nondiscriminatory evaluations; and educating students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. In preparing this Digest, the authors recognize the need to publicize effective approaches in the education of AI/AN students with disabilities. Too often, one reads about the failures or limitations of our students, their parents, and those who educate them. This prompts one to ask what are we doing successfully? As we identify, develop and implement effective practices, we must make others aware of our successes. Use of these and other effective practices will help to ensure that AI/AN students with disabilities receive the free and appropriate education guaranteed by law.

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Note: This list includes several Web links that were operative at the time of publication. Web links in the on-line version of this Digest will be continuously updated (http://www.ael.org/eric/indians.htm).

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